



[3410-11- P]

## **DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

### **Forest Service**

#### **Black Hills National Forest, Custer, South Dakota – Mountain Pine Beetle Response Project**

**AGENCY:** Forest Service, USDA.

**ACTION:** Corrected notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

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**SUMMARY:** This project proposes to treat areas newly infested by mountain pine beetles on approximately 250,000 acres of the Black Hills National Forest. Treatments would occur in both South Dakota and Wyoming, and on all four Ranger Districts. Treatments would be carried out within the scope of direction provided in the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Black Hills National Forest, as amended (Forest Plan).

The original notice of intent for this project was published in the Federal Register on Monday, August 8, 2011 (76FR48120). This corrected notice of intent is being published now because the treatment area acreage has changed from 325,000 to 250,000, and because an additional alternative has been developed. Were it to be selected, a Forest Plan amendment would be needed to implement that alternative. The original NOI did not identify the need for a Forest Plan amendment as part of the Decision to be Made.

**DATES:** The draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) is expected in March 2012, and the final environmental impact statement is expected in August 2012.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Katie Van-Alstyne, project team leader, Black Hills National Forest, Mystic Ranger District, Rapid City, SD 57701, phone (605) 343-1567. Individuals who use telecommunication devices for the deaf (TDD) may call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 1-800-877-8339 between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., Eastern Time, Monday through Friday.

## **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**

### **Purpose and Need for Action**

The purposes of the project are to reduce the threat to ecosystem components including forest resources on National Forest System (NFS) lands from the ongoing mountain pine beetle epidemic, and to help protect local communities and resources on adjacent lands of other ownerships from large-scale wildfire by reducing hazardous fuel levels.

### **Proposed Action**

Background The Black Hills National Forest (the Forest) lies in the Black Hills of western South Dakota and eastern Wyoming. Of the roughly 1.5 million acres in the Black Hills, about 1.2 million acres are National Forest System (NFS) lands, with lands of other ownership comprising another 300,000 acres. The predominant tree species on lands of all ownerships in the Black Hills is ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosae*). Since 1997 the Black Hills area has experienced a significant increase in pine tree mortality from an outbreak of mountain pine beetle (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*). In many parts of the Forest beetle populations are at or approaching epidemic levels. The outbreak in the Black Hills is part of a larger bark beetle epidemic which has recently affected more than 40 million acres of forest land in the western United States.

In the Black Hills mountain pine beetles (MPB) typically prefer stands of dense, mature pine

trees. Tree stands in this condition are frequent and continuous throughout the area. Once attacked by beetles, most trees typically die, and eventually fall to the ground, adding dead and dry fuels within an area already rated as having high wildfire hazard. Since 1980, due to several factors including drought the Forest has seen a dramatic increase in acreage burned by wildfires. In that period over 250,000 acres have burned, consuming forest resources and posing threats to lands of other ownership intermingled with NFS lands.

Proposal The primary management tools for reducing beetle-caused tree mortality are removing infested trees, and reducing the density of remaining trees to lessen the susceptibility to attack. The Forest Service is working to manage persistent and increasing populations of the mountain pine beetle across the Forest. As part of that larger effort the Forest is proposing the Mountain Pine Beetle Response Project (MPBRP -- the project). The project would be conducted as an authorized hazardous fuels reduction project under the authority of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA). The proposed action would treat newly detected infestations that may occur on about 250,000 acres of NFS lands to reduce and slow the spread of MPB. Specifically, newly infested trees would be removed, or made unsuitable for occupancy by beetles, before beetles can mature and further disperse to other trees. Some surrounding mature trees at risk of infestation may also be removed. A variety of treatment options would be available for use depending on conditions encountered on infested sites. Actual treatments used at any specific location would be determined at the time of implementation. Treatment options would include commercial tree removal using ground-based or cable logging equipment, or helicopter; non-commercial methods such as chipping trees or cutting them into short sections; and spraying small areas of trees to prevent infestation. Some temporary road construction is proposed, although generally road access

would use existing road templates where available. Roads would be closed after use.

### **Possible Alternatives**

The No Action alternative would not authorize any actions on the project area at this time.

One other alternative was developed for detailed consideration based on scoping comments.

### **Lead and Cooperating Agencies**

No cooperating agencies have been identified.

### **Responsible Official**

The Responsible Official for this project is the Forest Supervisor, Black Hills National Forest, 1019 North 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Custer, South Dakota, 57730.

### **Nature of Decision To Be Made**

After considering the proposed action and any alternatives, the environmental analysis, and public comment, the Forest Supervisor will decide whether to conduct treatments to reduce and slow the progress of the beetle epidemic. If an action alternative is selected, the Supervisor will decide where treatments may occur, and what actions are appropriate and may be taken. The Supervisor will also decide whether to amend the Forest Plan as part of the decision, and if so, the nature of that amendment. Finally, the decision will include the scope of monitoring that should occur.

### **Scoping Process**

The original notice of intent initiated the scoping process, which guides the development of the environmental impact statement. The Forest Service sought to involve interested parties in identifying issues related to responding to and managing the ongoing insect outbreak.

Public comment has helped the planning team identify key issues and opportunities to develop appropriate responses and alternatives, and monitoring strategies, and to evaluate the

effects of the proposal.

Three public meetings were held at the scoping stage of project analysis, on August 23, 2011, in Sundance, Wyoming, at the Crook County Courthouse; August 25 in Hill City, South Dakota, at the high school; and August 30 in Spearfish, SD, at the Holiday Inn. In addition, three public meetings will be held during the comment period on the DEIS.

The Forest Service recognizes the broad public interest in the communities and counties lying in or adjacent to the Black Hills, as well as the States of South Dakota and Wyoming. The initial mailing list for this project includes counties and municipalities lying wholly or partially within the Forest boundary.

It is important that reviewers provide their comments at such times and in such manner that they are useful to the agency's preparation of the environmental impact statement. Therefore, comments should be provided prior to the close of the comment period and should clearly articulate the reviewer's concerns and contentions.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered, however.

/s/ *Dennis Jaeger*

February 15, 2012

**DENNIS JAEGER**

**DATE**

Deputy Forest Supervisor

Black Hills National Forest

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